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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: FOURTH SESSION OF 52ND LEGISLATURE OPENS

REF A: 2008 MONROVIA 1059
REF B: 2008 MONROVIA 1049

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Liberian House and Senate held separate opening ceremonies January 12 to mark the beginning of the Fourth Session of the 52nd Legislature. About two-thirds of the Legislators were present, with some members still abroad after four months of recess. Vice President Boakai, as President of the Senate, asked the Senators to accept the Supreme Court's ruling and reinstate Senate Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo, but the Senate is still divided over who should lead it (Ref A). Speaker of the House Alex Tyler told his chamber that he expected them to arrive at a compromise on the population threshold for redistricting in time for the 2011 elections to go forward as planned (Ref B). The other House priorities for this year include agriculture, roads, and mining. END SUMMARY.

SENATE LEADERSHIP CRISIS STILL ONGOING

¶12. (SBU) Delivering the keynote address at the opening of the Senate, Vice President Joseph Boakai told the Senators that "as lawmakers, they should respect laws too," by which he meant the Senate should accept the Supreme Court's order that Senate Pro Tempore Isaac Nyenabo should be reinstated immediately. Boakai also urged the Senate to be mindful of how the public perception of the chamber has eroded because of the leadership crisis.

¶13. (SBU) The Senate, however, seems no closer to settling the dispute. Lahai Lasannah, arguing the Supreme Court had no right to interfere on this Legislative Branch issue, is refusing to step down as Acting President Pro Tempore until the Senate meets to vote on Isaac Nyenabo's suspension. However, the Senate was unable to convene for its first working session January 13 because of disagreement on who would chair the session.

¶14. (SBU) Nyenabo told PolAsst January 12 that he believes he is on the right side of the law and is trying to remain calm. He expects the Senate will reinstate him in accordance with the Supreme Court ruling in the next couple of days. Nyenabo told PolAsst he believes that Lasannah and his supporters have quickly used up more than 60 percent of the Pro Tempore's budget and are afraid of getting audited if power reverts back to Nyenabo. Nyenabo also said Lasannah's supporters who are committee chairs are afraid of losing their position if Lasannah is no longer in control.

HOUSE WILL TACKLE THRESHOLD POPULATION QUESTION

¶15. (SBU) Speaker of the House Alex Tyler laid out his priorities for the Fourth Session in his keynote address. He said developments in agriculture, roads, and mining were crucial for the social and economic well-being of the Liberian people. He said that he expects the House to pass a threshold population bill early in the session to enable the National Elections Commission to begin the redistricting process so that the 2011 elections will not be delayed. He also said the House will consider the Community Rights Act, the audit reports submitted to the Legislature by the General Auditor, the Freedom of Information Act, and a bill on the national parks this year.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) The two most important issues we will be watching in the Legislature this session are the lawful resolution of the Senate leadership crisis and a population threshold compromise in the House. In the Senate, if Nyenabo is reinstated per the court order, there is a possibility that Lasannah's supporters will try again to remove him. Arriving at an equitable threshold compromise in the House is going to test Members' ability to put service to their country over their own interests. But, if the two chambers can successfully resolve these challenges through the political process, they will have demonstrated real growth and maturity of the Legislature as an institution.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD